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Welcome to **ATTACK!** a two-page occasional publication. Most of **ATTACK!** will be concerned with the holistic curriculum which, if acted on, is a fundamental way to undermine the present undemocratic education system. Don't be discouraged if opportunities to teach holistically are limited, do your best, be a guardian, and act as a witness to this culturally significant and inspiring way of teaching and learning. **ATTACK!** is a partner to <https://networkkonnet.wordpress.com>

The right response to dyslexia

The most telling statement by Gavin Drew is when he says: 'I have pondered this quite a bit over the years and my return to literacy tutoring has convinced me that if anything is indispensable for literacy development it is the Goodman-Clay whole language experience embedded in real reading and writing situations relevant to the learner's interests and goals.' Gavin's surrounding argument, is sometimes complex, often subtle, but the final holistic message is unmistakable. And an acceptance of that message should shift the locus for attention to dyslexia from outside school to inside (as long as extra staffing is provided), amounting to a significant turnaround of both current policy and practice.

Gavin writes: I have noted your website with much interest, especially your defence of the whole language approach to reading with the article, 'The battle for primary school reading – Is the phoneme on the wall?' In that article, you critically pursue those who disparage the whole language approach and who advocate in its place a more or less exclusive attention to phonemic awareness. In academic circles as well as in the general media there are academics who are strident in advocating that for all phonemic written languages, phonemic awareness is the one and only key to resolving reading difficulties, including the complex matter of dyslexia.

I am dyslexic – diagnosed, as a young adult in 1974, and confirmed by a cognitive psychologist. I am a trained teacher, having gained several tertiary qualifications, some relevant to the understanding of language and teaching. I remain engaged in literacy learning matters and am currently a tutor in adult literacy in several contexts.

I write because I find that we share a concern about the exclusivist advocates of phonemic awareness in the teaching of reading. Certainly, I do think that some formal tutoring in phonemic awareness is useful, especially when phonemic awareness has not been developed by 'osmosis' as a consequence of whole language experience, but the supposed silver bullet significance of bottom-up phonics founders on the simple point that language can hardly be reduced to phonics – there are other equally necessary aspects to language as language and, therefore, to literacy as literacy. The skills of reading and writing can't simply be reduced to phonemic awareness, notwithstanding that phonemic awareness and processing is necessarily intrinsic to reading and writing.

The pedagogically adequate facilitation of listening and speaking, reading, and writing surely entails attention to both bottom-up and top-down considerations. I have pondered this quite a bit over the years and my return to literacy tutoring has convinced me that if anything is indispensable for literacy development it is the Goodman-Clay whole language experience embedded in real reading and writing situations relevant to the learner's interests and goals.

Yes, dyslexic people may need targeted instruction in phonics, but their dyslexia is not the fault of whole language schooling; their dyslexia is the result of dyslexia. To put it even more directly, the problem is the dyslexia, not a conjectured lack of phonics. The advocates of phonics to the exclusion of whole language know that dyslexia is a neuropathology not a matter of environmentally induced developmental delay – yet they cannot restrain themselves from implying that if dyslexic people had been 'given' lots of phonics they would now be either all right or at least much better off. These advocates might recognise that dyslexia is not a matter of environmentally induced developmental delay or a simple consequence of poor or misguided teaching but that does not stop them acting or advocating as if it is. Dyslexia as being something pathological is somehow lost in the process.

In a nutshell, it seems there is a catch-22: How does one learn to do phonemic processing when one is pathologically unable to do phonemic processing well? The failure not to recognise this catch-22 is decidedly strange. I have long intuitively recognised that dyslexia is, at its core, a relative inability to keep all the relevant cognitive balls in the air while juggling complex representational mental tasks – mental tasks relevant to the use of language and the manipulation of language-like symbols. This recognition has been strongly supported by recent neuro-psychological evidence.

I suggest that many adult dyslexics have adequate, even above average to very good phonemic awareness, but they still experience major difficulty neuro-processing phonemic structures in the actual events of reading and spelling. I would also suggest that the continuing decoding and recoding issues, persistent throughout adulthood for dyslexic people, are a consequence of a deeper, more fundamental, problem in neuro-sequencing within working memory. I suggest that dyslexia is, at bedrock, a difficulty in the complex sequencing involved in recognition, decoding, and recoding.

Even when phonemic awareness is facilitated well and the learner does indeed develop adequate phonemic awareness that, of itself, does not necessarily address the dyslexia. For example, I learnt moderately complex classical Greek – Greek is phonemically regular and the Greek alphabet and orthography is helpfully close to the English alphabet and orthography – I developed good phonemic awareness of classical Greek. But the dyslexia – which is my life-time experience – remained when seeking to read, write, or copy Greek at any adequate speed.

So, to reiterate, I suggest that the continuing decoding and recoding issues, which persist throughout adulthood for dyslexic people, are actually a consequence of a deeper, more fundamental problem in neuro-sequencing within working memory. It seems that dyslexia is, at its core, a difference in neuro-processing – an issue with representational sequencing within significantly reduced working memory, compared to non-dyslexics.

If dyslexia is, at bedrock, a difficulty in the complex neuro-sequencing involved in recognition, decoding, and recoding, then the issues with phonics are but a manifestation of the deeper problem and the facilitation of phonemic awareness will, at best, go only some way to assisting.

My persistent professional question is, 'How does one help a dyslexic person to read better and write better?' Knowing about those representations is a different cognitive process from using them adequately (according to their rules). A lack of that distinction is surely why the phonics exclusivists simply advocate the teaching of phonics as one might to 'anyone', dyslexic or non-dyslexic alike. But, it is the non-universality of the neuro-processes – but presupposed as universal by the one-size-fits-all phonics theorists – that is at the heart of the catch-22 mismatch entailed in what they advocate.

I have used phonics-based learning as part of working with dyslexic learners because, certainly, phonemic awareness is an indispensable aspect of written language literacy. It would be utterly wrong to exclude phonemic awareness. But in the end, the process of literacy learning for a dyslexic person is indeed broadly same as for any non-dyslexic person. And what is broadly the same is not narrow phonics but wide, supported literacy experience.

Instead of reducing all literacy learning matters to phonics, we must trust in the brain's plasticity in the context of rich and properly focused, well supported language experience. An abundance of well-structured, personally highly meaningful written language experience – experience that takes proper account of whole language insights and works synthetically within the context of real, contextually relevant, reading and writing – the dyslexic brain will, over time, re-programme adequately and the experience of dyslexia will be ameliorated – though never 'cured'. What is key is the close support of dyslexic learners as they struggle with the details of language in their acts of real reading and writing.

Understandably, dyslexic people don't like reading and writing so they avoid engaging in those tasks, especially when they receive no support in their attempts to engage. But engaging in those tasks holistically, meaningfully, is the very thing they need to do. Literacy is developed with dyslexic learners by sustained, supported effort in real literacy tasks at the learner's zone of proximal development. Just as we trust the body's capacity to build muscle and stamina through sustained effortful exercise, similarly we must trust the plasticity of the brain to re-programme through sustained effortful holistic exercise in reading and writing.

What is needed by dyslexic learners to sustain learning from the regular doing of reading and writing is trustworthy, continuing, interpersonal support in relevant engagement, not abstracted exclusivist instruction in phonics. It is in the social context of the interpersonal engagement that language and literacy develops and it is in the interpersonal context of close support that language difficulties can be ameliorated. That takes holistic interpersonal faith, trust, and human warmth, not simply instruction in phonics.

